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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BOGOTA 002071

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/27/2014
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [CO](#) [FARC](#)
SUBJECT: FARC ATTEMPTS MAJOR KIDNAPPING IN HUILA DEPARTMENT

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

Summary

1. (C) On February 23, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia's (FARC) Teofilo Forero Mobile Column (TFMC) launched simultaneous attacks on a luxury residential complex in Neiva, Huila department, the city's power grid, and an isolated military outpost west of the city. A quick police response prevented a mass kidnapping in Neiva, although guerrillas escaped with two wealthy hostages. The Army, which lost at least 12 soldiers during the FARC's assault on the military base, failed to respond to either the kidnapping or the attack on the base, which lasted five hours. President Uribe responded to the setback by requesting the resignation of military and civilian intelligence officials, including the commander of the Ninth Brigade and the local director of the Department of Administrative Security (DAS). Local press coverage is calling this the most ambitious FARC operation in months, and a setback for the government. End Summary.

A Well-Planned Attack

2. (C) In one of its most well-coordinated, dramatic operations since its bombing of Bogota's El Nogal social club in February 2003, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) coordinated nearly simultaneous attacks on a luxury condominium complex in Neiva, capital of Huila department, the city's power grid, and an isolated military outpost west of the city. At around 11:00 p.m. on February 23, approximately 20 guerrillas from the FARC's Teofilo Forero Mobile Column (TFMC) arrived at a luxury condominium complex on the outskirts of Neiva. Dressed as Army GAULA (anti-kidnapping) officials and using vehicles similar to those used by the Army, they presented false documentation to the complex's private security guards that allowed them to obtain access to the high-security residential community. Once inside, they immobilized the guards and kidnapped residents of pre-selected apartments, blowing down front doors with explosives when necessary. All told, the FARC attempted to kidnap approximately 30 persons, including prominent local businessman Luis Ernesto Bernal and cattle rancher Luis Fernando Borrero, reportedly a personal friend of President Uribe.

3. (C) The Colombian National Police (CNP), who were on high alert because of intelligence pointing to an imminent attack, responded immediately, forcing the guerrillas to release all but two of their hostages before they left the complex. Three CNP officers and one civilian were injured in the gun battle. The guerrillas, following a well-planned escape route lined with obstacles and booby-traps that slowed police pursuit, managed to escape with Bernal and Borrero. Their escape took place in total darkness, thanks to a successful FARC attack on the city's power grid.

4. (C) Simultaneous to the Neiva kidnapping operation, in an apparent diversionary attack, the TFMC assaulted an isolated Army outpost west of Neiva. The five-hour attack included the use of gas cylinder bombs and left at least 12 of the post's 35 soldiers dead. The Army's 9th Brigade, based in Neiva, which did not respond to the mass kidnapping attempt, also failed to send reinforcements to the isolated base under assault.

A Proven Tactic

15. (C) Disguising themselves as Colombian government authorities to gain access to homes and government facilities is a time-proven FARC tactic. The TFMC conducted similar kidnappings at another luxury apartment complex in Neiva in July 2001 and Cali's provincial assembly headquarters in April 2002. Over 20 hostages from those mass kidnappings are still in FARC hands.

Zero Tolerance From Uribe

16. (C) President Uribe held regional and national leaders of the security forces responsible for failing to anticipate and prevent the attacks, immediately requesting the resignations of the Army's Ninth Brigade commander, the military's National GAULA director and local Huila director, and the director, deputy director, and intelligence chief of the Department of Administrative Security's (DAS) Huila office.

Comment

17. (C) Local press coverage is declaring this near-destruction of a military outpost and major attack against civilians in a high-security residential complex the largest FARC attack in months and a clear setback. In contrast to the Cali and 2001 Neiva kidnappings, however, the CNP's preparation and response prevented a much larger kidnapping.
WOOD

=====CABLE ENDS=====